

“The Disease of Capitalism”: Mechanism of Boredom and Corporeal Narrative of *The Pale King*

Wan Xiaomeng

Abstract: David Foster Wallace's posthumous novel *The Pale King* shows a widespread spiritual crisis among IRS tax examiners in mid-1980s, who experienced boredom, selfishness, and apathy. Among those issues, boredom has arrested most scholarly attention. As a rejoinder to such critics as Ralph Clare, Joseph F. Goeke, and Joseph B. Nash, this article attempts to gear the discussion of boredom in connection with the body by taking a close look at the corporeal narrative in *The Pale King*. It contends that as a mental state, boredom has much to do with one's body, as it may either bring physical pains, destroy one's self, or mechanize a group. Boredom can be easily transferred to anyone, while endurance of boredom can correct our radical ways of living.

Key words: David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, corporeal narrative, boredom

Author: Wan Xiaomeng is a Ph. D candidate at School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai 200240, China). She is currently engaged in the study of narratology and David Foster Wallace (Email: wanxm1993@sjtu.edu.cn).

标题: “资本主义的弊病”: 厌倦的运行机制与《苍白之王》的身体叙事

摘要: 大卫·福斯特·华莱士的遗作《苍白之王》呈现了八十年代中期美国国税局税收审查官普遍经历的厌倦、自私、冷漠等精神危机。其中, 厌倦一直是相关研究的核心话题。本文试图介入拉尔夫·克莱尔、约瑟夫·F. 格克、约瑟夫·B. 纳什等人对此话题的讨论, 从身体叙事视角详细解读厌倦与身体的关系, 指出厌倦作为一种心理状态, 与物质身体有着紧密联系。厌倦可能带来身体上的痛苦, 可能会令人丧失自我, 也可能会使整个群体机械麻木。厌倦很容易在人与人之间传播扩散, 但学会承受厌倦也能纠正过于激进的生活态度。

关键词: 大卫·福斯特·华莱士; 《苍白之王》; 身体叙事; 厌倦

作者简介: 万晓蒙, 上海交通大学外国语学院博士生, 主要从事叙事学和大卫·华莱士小说研究。本文系国家社科基金重大项目“当代西方叙事学前沿理论的翻译与研究”【项目编号 17ZDA281】的阶段性研究成果。

Against the backdrop of the tax frustration in 1989, David Foster Wallace’s posthumous novel *The Pale King* (2011) is presented as a memoir belonging to a fictional author “David Wallace,” a former IRS (Internal Revenue Service) examiner who wants to document the life and work of IRS examiners in 1980s. The multiple genres of records and magical design of plots are twisted and interwoven with such issues as boredom, selfishness, and apathy. Recent years has seen the increasing attention paid to the issue of boredom in this novel. For instance, Ralph Clare examines the construction of multi-faceted boredom in *The Pale King* and interprets how it functions “socially, culturally, and politically in the age of neoliberal capitalism” (Clare 429). Joseph F. Goeke interrogates boredom from the perspective of existential philosophy and claims that boredom has evolved into “an aimless, default, self-centered nihilism” in the character Chris Fogle (Goeke 193). Joseph B. Nash analyzes the influence of Buddhism and meditation on Wallace’s attitude to boredom, leading the discussion toward a general prescription for the practice of awareness, in the sense of which “boredom can become the whetstone of awareness” (Nash 81). Admittedly, the above Wallace scholarship provides readers with multiple perspectives on the abstract concept of boredom in *The Pale King*.

Boredom is “easier to describe than to define” (Greenson 7), consisting of several components like dissatisfaction, disinclination, aimless longing and sense of emptiness (Greenson 7). People often emphasize its psychological dimension, so do the above-mentioned research works, one shared problem of which is that they draw readers’ attention to boredom only as a type of mental experience, and all their extensions of boredom, no matter to cultural, political or psychological fields, are based on this premise. However, as Wallace argues, “I just got interested in the reality of boredom, which is something that I think is a hugely important problem and yet none of us talk about it.” (Wallace, “Some Kind of Terrible Burden” 128) The psychological dimension of boredom is not the only thing that Wallace intends to write about. Therefore, to understand the reality of boredom, we should also take into consideration its concrete form—the symptoms of boredom on physical bodies, not only because it is a visible material agent for us to understand the invisible state of mind, but also because the body is “malleable, permeable, primitive, animal, and universal” and playing an essential role in most of Wallace’s works (Sloane 1).

This article attempts to extend current corporeal narrative studies of Wallace’s works in connection with his conception of boredom. First of all, it considers boredom as a mental state that has much to do with one’s body, focusing on characters’ bodies and feelings that are affected by boredom. Then, it investigates

the varied corporeal narratives and reveals the “mechanism” of boredom, namely how boring life changes characters’ bodies and minds. In particular, it analyzes five corporeal narrative cases in accordance with different effects of boredom, namely, physical complications of boredom, collective mechanization of boredom, the transference of boredom, boredom’s deprivation of healthy personality, and positive effects of enduring boredom. In doing so, it suggests that by looking into corporeal narratives of boredom illuminated in *The Pale King*, readers can have a more objective understanding of boredom and thus can deal with it better in their life.

The Physical Pains as Complications of Boredom

One dominant effect of boredom on bodies is that it makes the body suffer both psychological and physical symptoms, which are like “complications” of “boredom disease.” Since boredom often comes from doing something repetitive and endless, such as the IRS examination work, human body can easily get sick from it. To provide reader with close access to those bodies that are suffering pains in boredom, Wallace employs multi-perspectives on representing the complications of boredom in individual bodies. Readers can observe and even experience both the internal feelings and external performances of them.

From an external perspective, boredom in *The Pale King* is like an invasive disease with a syndrome that can deprive characters of their energy and consciousness. It is the mechanization of body that generalizes the external symptoms of boredom. Characters like Sylvanshine, Garrity, and Chris Fogle’s father all have their bodies mechanized by boring work. One of the shared traits of these bodies is that they remain in some special posture of working regardless of whether they are at work. For example, Chris Fogle observes that:

I remember being aware that my father’s overall posture or bearing seemed unusual for a shorter man—many short men tend to stand ramrod straight, for understandable reasons—in terms of his seeming not slumped but more like slightly bent forward at the waist, at a slight angle, which added to the sense of tension or always walking into some kind of wind. I know that I wouldn’t understand this prior to entering the Service and seeing the bearing of some of the older examiners who spend all day for years at a desk or Tingle table, leaning forward to examine tax returns, primarily to identify those that should be audited. In other words, it’s the posture of someone whose daily work means sitting very still at a desk and working on something in a concentrated way for years on end. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 177)

After many years of the repetitive work of accounting, Fogle’s father is used to a posture of working: bent forward at a slight angle, moving slowly and carefully. His “sense of tension” is the state of a body caught in a continuation of the working state, just like a machine that is always prepared for work. Accounting work requires one to concentrate closely on lines of precise figures. Correspondingly, people doing accounting work will maintain the same posture for a long time and devote all their minds to accounting work. Fogle’s father and other examiners’ machine-like postures are a result of being bored and exhausted by work in a fixed space for a long time. This posture is not only a special symptom for accounting and examining workers. Wallace tries to show that machine-like bodies is a universal symptom for all boring jobs. Garrity, the ghost in the IRS office who used to be a factory worker, proves this argument with his body. He “kept moving his upper body around in a slight kind of shape or circle, and the movements left a little bit of a visual trail” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 384). These movements represent the habit of his line inspection job, a type of endless and repetitive work that causes boredom in workers.

Throughout the above cases, the external complications of boredom represent the body’s submission to boring life. Fogle’s father “spen[t] all day for years at a desk” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 177); Garrity did his inspections “three times a minute, 1,440 times per day, 356 days a year, for eighteen years” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 317-318). Their complications of boredom have much to do with the pervasive industrial culture of “overworked American” (Katz 311), where human bodies begin to lose the balance between work and rest. As shown in *The Pale King*, being overloaded with work seems to become a common state of living among American citizens. Their experiences are simplified by time. Even one sentence can encapsulate many years of one’s life, because they just repeat the same work every day. The body is also simplified by time. It remains in the same posture as a working machine all the time. For making money or other reasons, most IRS examiners cannot leave their work to change their ways of living. Therefore, they could only stay and let their bodies be gradually distorted by boring and repetitive job. Space, or the environment, as another factor that distorts the body, also shapes the machine-like body. In the era of the narrative in *The Pale King*, machines have taken over in many industries. IRS examiners use an adding machine to transport files to be examined, the human resources department uses a computer to help with management, and factories are equipped with production lines to increase efficiency. Consequently, the examiners are required to deal with much more work than before. Just as Wallace listed in his notes to *The Pale King*

that this work's first concern is "Machines v.s. People at performing mindless jobs" (Wallace, *The Pale King* 547), the characters' bodies take pains to work with machines, which prompts the reader to reflect on the machine's real-life effects. Many of the mechanized bodies are the result of cooperation with machines. The requirement to cooperate with a high-efficient machine just enhances the effect of boring examination work. In a word, technological inventions do not make life exclusively better. As long as the machines serve for human beings, there will always be some aspects of the production process that involves a human body's interaction with a machine. For this reason, it is inevitable for a human to cooperate with a machine. Fast-moving and efficient machines require workers to move at a fast speed that usually exceeds human speed of working. Together with a culture of overwork, the need for bodies to cooperate with machines forms rigid and static workers, who are mechanized both mentally and physically. The embodiment of mechanized characters in *The Pale King* might be an exaggeration, but it has a counterpart in reality, not only in the IRS of the 1980s, but also in many factories of today's world. Through the mechanization of individual bodies, Wallace invokes our reflections on the technologies and cultural products with which human beings are trapping themselves in their inventions. Further, he also informs us one aspect of boredom's side effect: boring life will probably bring painful distortion in material bodies.

Besides the distorted shape, bored bodies in *The Pale King* are suffering pains from the inside as well. Such a state first shows as painful physical feelings and organ diseases. It is a corollary of being overloaded with boring work. Sylvanshine, the newly assigned IRS examiner, shows some symptoms: "Sylvanshine's neck down through his shoulder blade was on fire, and he could feel the start of a jumping muscle in one of his eyelids" (Wallace, *The Pale King* 46). Another symptom is a comprehensive negative feeling that makes him both mentally and physically uncomfortable. On his way to the Reginal Examination Center, Sylvanshine feels himself flushed with "self-pity, a feeling not as dark as the wing of despair but tinged carmine with a resentment that was both better and worse than ordinary anger because it had no specific object" (Wallace, *The Pale King* 53-54). Sylvanshine's colleague Lane Dean is more clear-sighted, he knows that the terrible feelings are caused by boredom. When he encounters Garrity's ghost, he realizes that he is experiencing a kind of boredom which is "beyond any boredom he'd ever felt" (Wallace, *The Pale King* 379):

His buttocks already ached from flexing, and the mere thought of envisioning

the desolate beach unmanned him. He shut his eyes but instead of praying for inward strength now he found he was just looking at the strange reddish dark and the little flashes and floaters in there, that got almost hypnotic when you really looked at them. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 380)

Focalizing on characters' feeling at work or off work, Wallace provides an insight into the internal space of the characters' bodies that is only accessible to the characters themselves. However, this private space is also influenced by boring life. Filled with painful feelings and depressive thoughts, the private space of the examiners is dark, blank, and hopeless. What is more tragic, the examiners' feelings generate a tension with people's general recognition of them—they are known as the target of the public's hatred and are considered as a bureaucratic agency that exploits and threatens people. The IRS is the most powerful government institution in the United States. Every resident has to deal with income tax payments. The IRS has the right to sue anybody who fails to pay taxes correctly. Meanwhile, it is IRS that brings in most of the revenue needed to fund the federal government. That is why people often project their hatred of the government onto the IRS and its examiners. However, the truth is that examiners bear the pressure from both sides. As the examiner Mr. Glendening says in his dialogue with colleagues: “We'll be the cops they call when the party gets out of hand” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 149). Examiners are the IRS's tools in collecting money and punishing people. IRS examiners are “used” as “large, grinding, impersonal machines” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 262). While seen from the inside, they are self-consuming “machines,” sacrificing both their physical health and mental health. In exposing the examiners' bodily sufferings from boring work, Wallace expresses his condemnation of the American government's hypocrisy.

In Wallace's anatomy of the internal space of bodies, Sylvanshine and Lane Dean have shared their inner feelings or illusions which cannot be seen from the outside, but Wallace allows readers to observe the general state of these examiners' minds. One type of shared feelings is Sylvanshine's eyelid muscle twitch and Dean's desire for “shut[ting] his eyes”(Wallace, *The Pale King* 380). On the surface, both symptoms are a result of a long-time overuse of the eyes. It happens to Dean when he is working and to Sylvanshine when he is not using his eyes to examine. Further, the feeling of the eyelid's jumping or the shutting of eyes from working are both manifestations of the characters' awareness of their bodies. In other words, they are aware that their bodily and mental state are destroyed by boring work, while it is hard for them to get away—they do not have the mind

to escape and could only keep suffering from boredom. When closing his eyes, Sylvanshine has a “feeling not as dark as the wing of despair but tinged carmine” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 53), while Dean has a similar illusion of “reddish dark and the little flashes and floaters,” which even feel hypnotic (Wallace, *The Pale King* 380). Wallace embodies examiners’ mental world into internal physical experiences, which serve as a “code” for the reader to know what boredom “feels like.” He also provides some hints of characters’ moods, like “despair” and “boredom,” through the corporeal narratives to connect physical feelings to boredom. In this way, the reader is invited to become an observer of their corporeal feelings and an active judge of the idea hidden within these narratives. The similar body feelings of the two characters can invoke the reader’s feeling of déjà-vu and remind the reader to take these traits not as merely individual ones but as common complications of boredom.

The third perspective, as an innovative method of Wallace to embody boredom’s physical complications is that he invites the reader to enter the mechanized body of one examiner and experience how he or she feels in body after suffering from boredom’s complication. In the ending chapter of the work, Wallace uses the second person voice in the corporeal narrative and inserts the “you” into scenes with the interactions with a female therapist (called “facilitator” in the text). In this short chapter, Wallace brings the reader into a comprehensive all-around process of embodiment to express a moment of the mechanized body’s state. The identity of “you” is a “trained observer” with “nothing to observe” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 539), and the therapist is also embodied by her words and actions. In reading the narrative text, it is the reader who is led into the character of an IRS observer. The space, an office of therapist, according to the beginning sentence, “could be any office” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 539). In other words, the space could be any office that the reader can imagine, making it easier for the reader to take the initiative to enter the observer’s sensorium in the storyworld. An unspecified space allows the reader to increase their mental access to it, with the specified surroundings directing the reader’s feelings. In this way, the reader takes part in the story and has a chance to know the feelings of the mechanized body. Plus, the observer “you” is not embodied by any description of appearance, gender, or affection¹. Wallace designs this unspecified character to provide a perspective that the reader can take and experience as a mechanized body. From the perspective of the protagonist “you,” the reader can see or hear the therapist, meanwhile having

1 To avoid redundant pronoun using and misunderstanding of person deixis, the following text assumes the observer as male. This character is actually not specified in gender.

a feeling of the environment. Even the eye movement is directed by the narrative text. It is like the perspective from the inside of the body, and the experiencer is the reader. According to the therapist, we may know that the observer has weak consciousness and control of his body:

The setting at which you do not feel your own weight in the chair is two-thirds reclined. There is a disposable piece of paper attached to the headrest. Your sight line is the seam of the wall and drop ceiling; the toes of your shoes are visible at the lower periphery. The facilitator is not visible. The seam appears to thicken as the overheads are lowered to the level of a false dawn.

‘The way we start to relax and become aware of the body.

‘It is at the level of body that we proceed.

‘Do not try to relax.’ (Wallace, *The Pale King* 540)

The therapist asks “you” to relax and be aware of “your body,” before which she even reminds the observer, “you do have a body, you know” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 539). Meanwhile, the observer appears clumsy in relaxing. He is able to see and feel, but unable to relax his body from the mechanized state, just like a real machine which is always ready for work. The descriptions of the observer are flat accounts of sight without any mental activities, indicating the blank mind of a mechanized body. The action of seeing is machine-like as well, with the surroundings differentiated by “visible” and “not visible.” It is an indirect way of embodiment, dominated by the object or the senses about objects. What Wallace wants to illuminate from such an experience of the IRS observer is the powerlessness and indifference of a mechanized body. The boring examination job deprives him of dynamics in both his mind and body. For the body’s sensorium, the reader can share some experiences in seeing and listening with the observer, meanwhile the narrative also requires the reader to imagine the character’s internal feelings from the corporeal embodiments. Combining the embodied experience of the corporeal narrative with reader’s own deduction, the reader devotes an effort to understanding the mechanized body and will be more likely to reflect on it in practical life.

However, the powerless mechanized state of body is not always irreversible. Wallace provides some hope in the last sentence of the chapter: “And how vividly someone with no imagination whatsoever can see what he’s told is right here, complete with banister and rubber runners, curving down and rightward into a darkness that recedes before you” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 540). That is to say,

even though the complications of boredom bring painful experiences, we still have opportunities to recover from them.

Collective Bodies Getting Mechanized in Boredom

Another aspect of “the reality of boredom” is that the state of boredom can operate very powerfully in a group, mechanizing and numbing every member of it. In *The Pale King*, the IRS staff is such a group whose bodies are not only mechanized in the state of boredom, but also turned into an integral of boredom that can assimilate new comers. Wallace elaborates several key features of such a group with varied corporeal narrative features. The first and foremost feature is that examiners unanimously act in an extremely, unhumanly way. Many of them work together in a big office, but the workplace appears abnormal. “Wallace” feels shocked by his first glimpse of the Immersives Room:

There were at least 150 men and/or women in that room, all intently occupied and busy, and yet the room was so silent that you could hear an imperfection in the door’s hinge as Ms. Neti-Neti pushed it closed against the force of its pneumatic strut. This silence I remember best of all, because it was both sensuous and incongruous: For obvious reasons, we tend to associate total quiet with emptiness, not with large groups of people. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 292)

Seen from the surface, such a quiet place is a good atmosphere for working, especially for tax examination, which requires “professional concentration” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 386). This might be the source of his “sensuous” feeling. However, the quiet is not like that of a normal workplace where people may get distracted in various ways: “these were people who did not fidget” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 294). In other words, their uniformity has gone beyond the normal state of working. Such a quiet atmosphere can only be experienced when everybody is concentrating on his or her work. But it is almost impossible to achieve in an office with more than 150 people. The only way to make it possible is that everybody in the office must keep concentrated for a very long time. Besides the silence, they are doing the same work, which can be seen in another chapter:

‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. ‘Groovy’ Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at

once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. [...] ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Kenneth ‘Type of Thing’ Hindle detaches a Memo 402-C (1) from a file. ‘Second-Knuckle’ Bob McKenzie looks up briefly while turning a page. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 312)

The whole chapter contains multiple repetitions of “turns a page.” Dealing with paper files seems to be the only thing examiners can do at work. It is “not as mere illustrations of the pervasive boredom that blankets the IRS, but as matters of narrative record, or examples of novelistic datum” (Wouters 461), and it adopts one bodily action as the basic form of narrating. Wallace highlights and repeats the action of a turning page, suggesting the boring uniformity of examiners. Everybody is doing the same thing with the same identity. As a result, reader may see the group of more than 150 people as duplicates of one person. This oversimplified description of characters reveals the boring essence of examination work, and the long narrative without a concrete plot also causes a bored feeling in the reader, which in turn offers a realistic simulation of the examiners’ boredom from repetition. The examiners’ bodies act against the normal working state of office staff, meanwhile distancing the reader from the story world and providing a semiotic figure of this group of bored examiners. Thus, we can get out of the historical context of IRS in the 1980s and illustrate boredom’s effect on groups from a transhistorical perspective. The busy but quiet office atmosphere puts pressure on every examiner, and every examiner’s effort in concentrating on boring work sophisticates such atmosphere. Newcomers like Fogle and Cusk have also been quickly assimilated to the mechanized bodies. Ironically, the atmosphere is first established by the examiners themselves. That is to say, the unification of bodies has become a vicious integral. Once they start such a large amount of repetitive IRS work, they become more and more mechanized. When boredom deprives their bodies of their dynamic qualities, they do not look like human beings, and they remain in the mechanized state, showing no impetus to get away. To sum up, the second feature of IRS examiner groups is that they are forming a powerful and depressing atmosphere that newcomer’s body will easily conform to their manners, because an individual mind’s resistance can hardly fight such a group’s power. As more and more people get involved, the atmosphere created by this group grows, which may cause everyone to be more depressed and finally deteriorate the whole group.

In this case where a group of people deteriorate together, the most obvious

negative symptom of this situation, which is also the third feature of the examiners' group, is the morbid physical and mental state, which is the result of a large amount of repetitive work. The long-time state of being overloaded with examination renders examiners bored and desensitized, as they do not seem to feel tired. The situation shocks Lane Dean: "Neither man on either side of him seemed to ever fidget or move except to reach up and lift things onto the desk from their Tingles' trays, like machines, and they were never in the lounge at break" (Wallace, *The Pale King* 382-383). Working in this way, with terrible health conditions, occurs in many parts of *The Pale King*:

(When being interviewed) Pale and stunned, faces' planes queerly shadowed—this is not a problem, though on video some of the faces are a drained gray-white. Eyes are a problem. If the examiner looks at the documentarian instead of the camera, it can appear evasive or coerced." (Wallace, *The Pale King* 104-105)

(In waiting time) A few of the personnel seated or standing all around the room and connected hallways were reading files or filling out forms that might conceivably have had something to do with their assigned work, but most of them were staring vacantly into space or engaged together in wandering, desultory workplace conversations, the sort (as I learned) that neither start nor ever end. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 302)

Examiners show a miserable look in the camera, with their faces drained gray-white by work and their eyes' appearing strange. Such a state has become a shared trait among the examiners' bodies. We can also see the emptiness of their minds from their blank eyes, suggesting a feeling of confusion or aimlessness. As for their actions in their spare time, even though they do not behave in the same way, their bodies, no matter whether they are reading, gazing, or talking, collectively show a morbid state. On the one hand, they are like machines, for they have devoted most of their time and energy to working, and they have already lost their ability to enjoy life beyond working. The body's functions for these examiners are reduced to only examination. On the other hand, they are not energetic machines, because their bodies have suffered the accumulated negative effect of being overloaded by working, as shown not only in their pale faces and blunt minds, but also in the list in §11 of authorized syndromes/symptoms associated with examinations (Wallace, *The Pale King* 89-90). On this list are anxiety, headache, hypertension, paraplegia, and other serious symptoms. Combining the human and machine-like traits in

examiners’ bodies, Wallace intends to show us a group of characters who exist like human but act like nonhuman, and their human traits and nonhuman traits combat each other. The IRS requires examiners to do long time repetitive work (similar to the type of tasks of machines), and doing such work will do harm to their human bodies, reducing their enthusiasm and misshaping their bodily postures. When bodies try to react and send out unpleasant signals, pains and disease are the best evidence of such. After suffering the pains for some time when examiners are used to an internal “combat,” the numb mind and painful body begin to coexist until the examiner’s death or even exit after death, as Blumquist and Garrity appear in working state even when they are dead and becoming ghosts.

Working bodies in group represent a more vivid illustration of “boredom” related with the culture of overloaded working—they make a grand scene of “machines” working together in a “factory.” Further, we should notice about the definition of machine—a machine does not have subjectivity, and it must have a “controller” behind it to give it instructions. The “controller” for examiners is actually the American government. To put it in another way, the collective bodies of the examiners are Wallace’s entry point into political irony. In *The Pale King*, the examiners are just a tool for the government to collect money and shield itself from public attention. To quote Wallace’s words, “In the body politic of the United States of America, many have likened you IRS to the nation’s beating heart, receiving and distributing the resources which allow your federal government to operate effectively in the service and defense of all Americans” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 103). There’s much more to discover about this “heart.” As has been mentioned in the previous illustration, the public’s impression of IRS examiners is that they are decent office workers who exploit the general citizens from the top of the taxpaying hierarchy. Wallace puts people in an IRS advertising video into comparison with examiners behind the scenes. In the video, “GS-9s and -11s in ties and shirtsleeves, shaking hands with taxpayers, bent smiling over the books of an auditee, beaming in front of a Honeywell 4C3000 that is in fact an empty chassis” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 103). In the camera, the “factory” looks like a nice workplace—examiners behave elegantly with pleasant expressions, showing satisfaction with IRS working life. While the fact is that examiners are all pale and depressed, with their eyes evasive—they are drained by boring work. However, the more thrilling thing is not the silenced truth, but the way the U.S. government stops the truth from being known by the public, which discloses a special function of boredom, or, in the original text, dullness:

The real reason why US citizens were/are not aware of these conflicts, changes and stakes is that the whole subjects of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull. [...] The IRS was one of the very first government agencies to learn that such qualities help insulate them against public protest and political opposition, and that abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 85)

The U.S government uses dullness to suppress people's awareness. In other words, they are making use of the natural weakness of human body and mind, because normal people have limited ability to deal with boredom. On the IRS examiners' side, the repetitive and exhausting work takes up most of their time and energy, and they would not have the consciousness or capability for rational thinking—their minds are made machine-like, knowing only following the instructions. Viewed historically, the mechanized bodies imply a condemnation of the U.S. government, criticizing their oppression of examiners. To see it from the perspective of corporeal narrative theory, we can also realize how vulnerable human beings are in front of boredom. Group of bodies suffering boredom may experience distortions or pains, become numb, and finally deteriorate themselves. In addition, the group can also be more dangerous, bringing others in the same morbid and numb state without realizing its evilness.

The Transference of Boredom

Boredom not only tortures those who are doing repetitive work, but also hurts innocent ones. Characters tortured by boredom are unaware of their negative effects on those surrounding them, who may easily “pick up” boredom from bored characters. This is the third aspect of boredom's effect on bodies: it can be transferred from one to another without any prior condition. In *The Pale King*, an IRS manager unconsciously transfers his boredom to his infant who does not do repetitive work or feel any pressure. Relevant story happens mainly in §35, where “David Wallace” meets his Group Manager, Mr. Manshardt's baby, who does not appear like a newborn infant at all:

My Audit Group's Group Manager and his wife have an infant I can only describe as—fierce. Its expression is fierce, its demeanor is fierce, its gaze over bottle or pacifier—fierce, intimidating, aggressive. I have never heard it cry. When it feeds or sleeps, its pale face reddens, which makes it look all the fiercer[...] Its back lay directly against the Group Manager's, its large head

resting in the hollow of its father’s neck, forcing Mr. Manshardt’s head out and down into a posture of classic oppression. They made a beast with two faces, one of which was calm, bland, and adult, and the other unformed and yet emphatically fierce. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 389)

In general, people consider the infant as a cute and lovely figure who represents the hopeful future of a human being. In *The Pale King*, the infant looks more like an incarnation of evil. Wallace depicts the infant’s body and highlights its fierce air and weird appearance, creating a detestable impression of the infant. Readers will correspondingly choose a critical perspective in observing the infant. The weirder thing is that the infant seems to contain more malignity than a normal adult in boredom; it not only conveys a fierce air that keeps people at a distance, but it also makes a two-faced beast together with Mr. Manshardt, its father. Compared to the “calm, bland” face of Mr. Manshardt, the infant’s face looks even more dreadful. A comparison between the face of Manshardt’s body and the infant’s body just adds to the horrific effect, and it further encourages the reader to find out what makes the infant’s body abnormal. Viewed from the clues within the chapter, Mr. Manshardt’s lack of parental responsibility may be the major reason.

The narrator “David Wallace” observes that “[the infant’s] presence seemed not to interfere with Manshardt’s office duties, [...] Once the working day began, however, the Group Manager appeared for the most part to ignore the infant, and to be ignored by it in return” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 391). To set his wife free, Mr. Manshardt attains permission to put the infant in his office, but he does not provide any care: “sometimes the office smelled slightly of powder or pee. I did not know when the GM changed the infant...” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 391). Mr. Manshardt is often busy with his work in the IRS. The infant usually stays in a smelly and messy environment. More details from the narrator’s experience in Mr. Manshardt’s office show the infant’s strange behavior. The narrator “heard the unmistakable adult sound of a cleared throat, albeit at an extremely high pitch, as if from an adult who had recently inhaled helium out of a decorative balloon” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 394). The sound is from the infant. After that:

The infant had set aside its teething ring—rather carefully and deliberately, as a man might set aside a file on his desk once he has completed it and is ready to turn his professional attention to another—to lie moist and shiny next to an upright bottle of what appeared to be apple juice, and had placed its tiny hands folded adultly together before it on the vivid blue plastic

of its play station, exactly as Mr. Manshardt or Mr. Fardelle or any of the other Group Managers or District Director's senior staff would place their clasped hands before them on the desk to signal that you and the issue that had brought you into their office now occupied their full attention, and cleared its throat again[...]gazing at me fiercely, said—yes, said, in a high and l-deficient but unmistakable voice—

‘Well?’

It now seems probable that it was at first my shock, my as it were nonplussedness at being spoken that adultly to by an infant in diapers and jammies soaked with drool, that led me so automatically to answer, to respond as I would to any expectant ‘Well?’ from a Service superior, functioning on, as it were, automatic pilot:

‘Excuse me?’ (Wallace, *The Pale King* 394)

It is both interesting and ridiculous that in a dialogue between an infant and an adult, the baby sounds much like a superior leader over a subordinate. The diapers, teeth ring, and apple juice bottle embody its identity as an infant. Besides, its tiny hands and his “extremely high pitch” of clearing throat belong only to an infant's body (Wallace, *The Pale King* 394). While the behaviors of the infant are in discordance with all of the infant's embodiments. Its movements of setting aside things, clasping hands, and clearing throat are adultlike, or to be exact, bureaucratic. The proficiency even invokes automatic reactions from the narrator, driving him to respond as he would do to a superior manager. An infant's body carries both physical attributes of infants and the movements of an adult, forming a dramatic tension in the reader's cognition and prompting the reader to inquire about the cause of such a tension. A newborn infant has to learn basic skills and movements by imitating parents or other caretakers. For Mr. Manshardt's infant, who stays for a long time in the office every day, the most likely imitation is bound to focus on the habitual movements of Mr. Manshardt. Moreover, Mr. Manshardt works hard and pays little attention to the infant. He even cannot change diapers on time. The hygiene issue remains unresolved, let alone taking care of its physical health. Therefore, the only connection or interaction between Mr. Manshardt and his infant is the infant's naturally imitating of Manshardt's office movements, which explains why they look like “a beast with two faces” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 389) when together.

In addition to imitation, the embodiment of the infant also arises as a response to Mr. Manshardt's way of living, through which we may learn more about

the negative effect of the IRS examiner’s boredom. The infant’s bureaucratic behavior of clearing its throat and clasping its hands are obvious learned from Mr. Manshardt’s bodily movements, while the emotional expressions are a response to the personalities of the father: “it just sat there, motionless and mute, gazing fiercely at whichever GS-9 auditors happened to enter our Group Manager’s small, frosted-glass office” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 390). Mr. Manshardt’s infant does not express its feelings as other infants do, like through crying or smiling. Instead, it seems to show little reaction to environment—it is “emotionless,” echoing Mr. Manshardt’s “bland” face. Mr. Manshardt’s body is acting in a restrained way, which narrator uses “bland” twice to describe. He speaks in a kindly tone to subordinates, and he takes the infant into the office to share responsibilities in raising his family. Even though he tries to be a qualified father and manager, his mind has been worn out by the repetitive work, and he is unable to react either positively or negatively. In other words, he has been trapped in boredom, and his status directly affects the infant. Lack of attention and care wears out the infant’s enthusiasm towards life. Without interest in any surrounding things, it just remains motionless and gazes fiercely. The infant does not need to conceal its emotion, so fierceness proves to be the final and only form of its dissatisfaction with the environment. We might understand it as the infant’s symptom of boredom.

As a topic throughout the whole work, boredom appears in various symptoms in different characters. While its effect becomes extremely shocking on an infant: a supposedly energetic and hopeful infant becomes calm and fierce because of the surrounding bland people and hopeless life. The infant receives boredom from father, but shows it in a more obvious and fierce way that is different from the father. It is even more shocking to see that the infant in *The Pale King* learns boredom quickly than other qualities, which seems to block it from developing other traits. Wallace shows us the bodies of Mr. Manshardt and his infant, emphasizing the transference of boredom in a seemingly ridiculous way. In their story, boredom is like a virus, powerful and infectious. It may cause a series of negative effects, even those that an infant cannot escape. Since the infant has been influenced in his babyhood, it is not difficult to envision the infant’s “bland” living status when it grows up, and his boredom may continue being transferred to future generations. The transference of boredom does not only happen between parents and child, it can also happen between normal people, of which Dean and Fogle getting assimilated to the mechanized group is the evidence (Wallace, *The Pale King* 312). To put it another way, the transference of boredom is a pervasive and important issue of the social culture. Clare has claimed that “Wallace is primarily

interested in exploring the roots of ‘boredom’ as a specific historical formation of late capitalist American life” (Clare 429). The embodiment of the infant shows some clues of boredom’s “root” in relation to the culture of overloaded working in capitalist American life. It is the easy transference of boredom that prompts the “root” of boredom to grow and become a “tree” that brings boredom to more people.

The Incomplete State of Living as Corrupted by Boredom

There is a group of transcendental agents between life and death in *The Pale King*—phantoms and ghosts. “David Wallace” records them seriously in his memoir, impressing readers with their “real existence.” From the perspective of corporeal narratology, Daniel Punday defines ghost as a central category within the “gray area” between body and nonbody (Punday 59). Ghost as a problematic body can create variegated structure of spaces (Punday 60), highlighting the spiritual state of individual. The following section will further this perspective to explore ghosts in *The Pale King*. Focusing on the actions of ghosts, it intends to provide another manifestation of boredom’s realistic effect: boring life can simplify people’s life to doing repetitive things, make them neglect other needs or desires, and keep them in such incomplete state of living, which remains even until the body is dead. The two ghosts in *The Pale King* lost their lives in the building of IRS. The bodily actions of the two ghosts, Blumquist and Garrity, vary greatly from each other, while they also bear some internal resemblances.

Blumquist, marked by quietness and diligence, suffered a heart attack and died at his desk in a working posture and was noticed four days later. His supervisor Scott Thomas comments that “He was very focused and diligent, so no one found it unusual that he was in the same position all that time and didn’t say anything. He was always absorbed in his work, and kept to himself” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 30). He behaves like a sad ghost:

When Blumquist manifests in the air near an examiner, he just basically sits with you. Silently, without moving. [...] He’s no bother. It’s not like he stares at you in an uncomfortable way. You get the sense that he just likes to be there. The sense is ever so slightly sad. He has a high forehead and mild eyes made large by his glasses.[...]most examiners accept or even like a visit from Blumquist. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 318)

Being a ghost who suddenly stops working in the IRS, the workaholic Blumquist

seems to have nothing to do and nothing to count on. He does not perform any frightening actions as other ghosts do. His mild large eyes show the same quietness and kindness as during his lifetime. We may read from such bodily traits that his too static state as examiner does not change with the death of his physical body. The elements constituting his self-consciousness were lost long before his death. Boring examination work in the IRS reduced both his mind and body to a simple state where he just repeats the same examination process and neglects everything else. Having been an examiner for over thirty years, Blumquist does not have the time, and gradually loses the ability, to think reasonably or establish relationships with others. Similar state can also be found in his colleagues, who do not discover his death for four days. Almost all the examiners were busy with working so that they failed to detect someone's death in their same office. They all work and live as examining “machines.” Therefore, coming back to the office might be the only thing Blumquist can do as a ghost. His behaviors remain unchanged after the death of his body. It is all the more pitiful to imagine that his spirit has nothing else left after death, which echoes with the “slightly sad” sense in Blumquist's story.

Another ghost, Garrity, who does another type of boring work, is embodied with more details. He used to be a line inspector, doing examination of flaws like bubbles or unevenness in mirror's backing:

He sat on a stool next to a slow-moving belt and moved his upper body in a complex system of squares and butterfly shapes, examining his face's reflection at very close range. He did this three times a minute, 1,440 times per day, 356 days a year, for eighteen years. Toward the end he evidently moved his body in the complex inspectorial system of squares and butterfly shapes even when he was off-duty and there were no mirrors around.” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 317-318).

After 18 years of mirror-examining, Garrity ended up hanging himself in what is now the IRS Regional Examination Center. The second time he appears is at Lane Dean Jr.'s desk: “He kept moving his upper body around in a slight kind of shape or circle, and the movements left a little bit of a visual trail. [...] There was something wrong with one of his eyes; the pupil of the eye was bigger and stayed that way, making the eye look fixed” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 384). Even though Wallace does not refer to the name of the ghost at Dean's desk, the narratives of the body are obvious enough for readers to match the ghost with Garrity. In contrast to Blumquist, Garrity is a frightening figure who is a “big older fellow with a

seamed face and picket teeth” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 384), and who “made his hands into claws and held them out at the other wiggler like a demon or someone possessed” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 387) and usually appeared “extremely chatty and distracting” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 318). His fidgeting is also in contrast to Blumquist’s quietness. More than 15 years after his death, Garrity still keeps moving his body in the butterfly shape trail as his working status, all the time. His eyes, one of which is fixed in some way, is restored to the state of inspecting mirrors as well. In other words, these features of the working body remain not only when he is off-duty, but also after his body is dead. Ironically, the only thing that remains throughout his life and death is not something spiritual, but rather the habit of a physical movement.

On the surface, the two ghosts vary greatly from each other. They work for different industries, live in different eras, and behave in different ways. Nevertheless, Wallace implies their similarity with one keyword: they both do “examinations” and both repeat the dull examination work for many years. If we go further to compare the narrative embodiments of their living states and ghost states, wherein their bodily postures are emphasized multiple times, it is easy to notice that their bodies remain the same in maintaining the attachment to work, and they both suffer from boring work. One widely accepted argument about ghosts in *The Pale King* from Hayes-Brady says that the ghosts are “a synecdoche of bureaucratic civilization” and “by their nature, a representative of the unfinished [...] which are deeply disturbing and frightening” (Hayes-Brady 150). I partly agree with Hayes-Brady on the ghost’s connection with bureaucratic civilization. To some extent, the two ghosts represent the apathetic living and working status of the majority of people in 1980s, which is just the deeply disturbing and frightening point. However, ghosts in *The Pale King* never have the idea or opportunity to really finish their endless work, no matter if they are alive or dead. Besides, the basic reason for their attachment to the place is not their consciousness of anything unfinished. Their behaviors are more like those of an unconscious and habitual state. Thus, it is better not to focus on the action of “finish” but to pay attention to the ghosts themselves, who are “incomplete.” First, they are incomplete bodies that have no concrete existence. Second, their personalities are incomplete throughout all their forms of existence. They are embodied like objects without human consciousness and rational thinking, looking more like machines than human beings. Their form of nonbody further emphasizes the mechanized lives of the IRS examiners, because such a status seems to be the most durable thing after death. The deeply frightening point lies not in the ghosts’ nonhuman features, but in the power of boredom and

the permanence of mechanized state.

In *The Pale King*, seeing the ghosts seems to be a kind of experience exclusively for IRS examiners. Taking Garrity as an example, he “is the easier of the wiggle room’s two ghosts to mistake for a phantom because he’s extremely chatty and distracting and thus is often taken by wigglers straining to maintain concentration as the yammering mind-monkey of their own personality’s dark, self-destructive side” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 318). Indeed, when an examiner Lane Dean sees Garrity, Dean is making every effort to concentrate. At the time, he feels boredom “beyond any boredom he’d ever felt” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 379) and sinks into extreme depression. “He had the sensation of a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor. Never before in his life up to now had he once thought of suicide.” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 380). In IRS examiners’ view, “mind-monkey” ghosts or hallucinations only appear when people are straining to concentrate, which manifests the abnormal “self-destructive side.” However, when people are extremely exhausted from long-time work or concentration, thoughts like “mind-monkey” is a normal reaction of body, or a hint of body’s natural resistance against continuing to work. While the IRS examiners take this experience as an enemy of concentrated work and force themselves to suffer from boredom, such an attitude would keep distorting their minds and bodies until they are completely mechanized into “incomplete” people. As a newcomer, Dean is not used to the visiting of the ghost at the beginning, so he “looked circumspectly to either side” to see other’s reactions (Wallace, *The Pale King* 385). While “the examiners on either side didn’t look up or pay attention; their fingers on the adders never slowed. Lane Dean couldn’t tell if this was a sign of their professional concentration or something else” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 386, emphasis mine). Most examiners are used to the visitations of ghosts, and some even “accept or even like a visit from Blumquist” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 318). The pains and emotional depressions of Dean are in contrast with the calmness of other examiners—they are suffering from boredom as well, but they have lost the ability to react as normal people. That may explain their special ability to see the nonbody existence of the “incomplete” ghost—they are becoming the living dead and will finally become the same type of ghosts. Both examiners and ghosts are in some unconscious, abnormal state. Ghosts are fictional, exaggerated, incomplete bodies that represent the long-lasting effect of boredom. Examiners are numbed, silenced, deprived of normal human senses and stay an incomplete state of living. Reading the ghosts’ “bodies,” we realize that these effects of boredom can be long-lasting damage both physically and spiritually, which may not be restore even after

death. In reality, boredom does not affect people in such an extreme and painful way, while as it gets more and more pervasive among working citizens, readers still need to be aware if we are driven “incomplete” by the boredom.

Positive Effects of Enduring Boredom

The above cases are Wallace’s endeavor to illustrate boredom’s negative effect on bodies. However, boredom cannot be simply evaluated as bad or harmful. Sometimes the seemingly boring work can also have positive effects on body and mind. In real life, nobody can experience new and interesting things every day, so that repetition is unavoidable in life and we have to deal with them. For those who cannot tackle ordinary repetitive tasks, boredom can help them get on well with the reality and lead a better life. This is manifested in the story of IRS examiner Chris Fogle, whose turning point of life is the death of his father. Relevant narratives are contained in a fragmented long monologue of Fogle. His father, symbolized by his elegant hat, is just like most parents at the time—he speaks little and works hard to support the family. According to Fogle’s words, the father does not work for the IRS, but rather in the same industry, working busily as an accountant:

I can remember my father’s hat now almost better than his face under it. I used to spend time imagining what my father’s face looked like when he was alone—I mean his facial expression and eyes—when he was by himself in his office at work at the City Hall annex downtown and there was no one to shape a certain expression for. I remember my father wearing madras shorts on weekends, and black socks, and mowing the lawn like that, and sometimes looking out of the window at what he looked like in that getup and feeling actual pain at being related to him. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 170)

Embodied by his clothes and bodily actions, the father hardly left any emotional or facial impression on Fogle. Ironically, the father is remembered mostly by external features due to his limited communication with his family. Fogle is described by “David Wallace” as “inflicting on you a regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 261). While such a sensitive person speaks few words about his feelings against his father, from which we could infer a weak family bond in Fogle’s family. Such a relationship is much like what Wallace describes in his short story “The Soul Is Not Smithy,” where the narrator also recalls his memory of a deceased father in the 1960s and later reflects: “Sadder still was trying to imagine what he thought about [...] but the truth is that I have no idea what he thought about, what his internal life might have been like. And

that were he alive I still would not know” (Wallace, *Oblivion* 107). In Fogle’s eyes, his hardworking father is too dull, too silent. His father’s body is refrained and inhibited like an aimless working machine: “Like many men of his generation, he may well have been one of those people who can just proceed on autopilot” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 187). In contrast, Fogle spoiled his body with many other “wastoid” friends; in his words, “[I] lived, ate, partied, and hung around with a person I didn’t even really like or respect very much... which probably meant that I didn’t respect myself very much, either” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 188). He thinks his father completely conforms to his responsibility as bread earner, not making any attempt to escape his endless boredom. In his words, he doesn’t find any “major, conscious thinking” in father:

His attitude towards life was that there are certain things that have to be done and you simply have to do them—such as, for instance, going to work every day. Again, it may be that this is another element of the generation gap. I don’t think my father loved his job with the city, [...] He had a family to support, this was his job, he got up every day and did it, end of story, everything else is just self-indulgent nonsense. That may actually have been the lifetime sum-total of his thinking on the matter. (Wallace, *The Pale King* 193-194)

In Fogle’s undergraduate years, he was a very arrogant “wastoid,” wasting school time and money, feeling good for his “concentrated thinking.” Before his father’s death, he cannot even finish college—dropping out again and again, changing his alma mater more than three times. As “Wallace’s most direct and detailed portrait of Generation X apathy” (Boswell 27), Fogle despises his father and looks down upon father’s conforming attitude to a boring life and tedious work. At that time, the father often “squeeze his shoes” for his terrible performance in college; Fogle, in return, just keeps up with his apathy and wastes his youth, even taking his “wastoid” friends to party in his divorced father’s house and driving his father mad. Such conflicts between Fogle and his father are not resolved for a period after the father’s death.

Fogle’s father lost his life in a subway train accident, his body miserably fractured by the fast-moving train car. The clothes and other belongings associated with his body annihilated quickly and completely, as well. The thing marked in Fogle’s memory of the father’s body is his hat, a symbol of the father’s pride, which “flew off and was lost” at the subway station of the accident (Wallace, *The Pale King* 203). In addition, some other essential embodied elements of the father

have to be removed: “as a side note, there was no amount of alteration that could have made my father’s suits fit me. At that time, I was a 40L/30 with a 34 inseam, whereas the bulk of my father’s suits were 36R/36/30. The suits and archaic silk blazer ended up being given to Goodwill...” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 237-238). The father’s hat of pride was lost and his clothes that outline his figure in Fogle’s memory were sent to a second-hand store, which almost completely clears all traces of father from Fogle’s life. This is the last embodiment of irreconcilable difference between Fogle and his father. However, the father’s death does not lead to the victory of Fogle’s apathy against the father’s conformism, nor does the father’s conformist figure fade away with the clearance. Instead, father’s ability to do boring work seem to be transferred to Fogle after father’s death. Fogle’s wastoid attitude has been gradually worked away, and he is finally turned to be “such a conformist” to accept and endure boredom, just like his father.

Shortly after the father’s accident, Fogle’s mother had her “emotional status reached the point where she elected to discontinue all litigation (for father’s subway accident)” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 203). Such litigation is challenging work, since “the entire process was about numbers and money rather than anything like justice, responsibility, and the prevention of further wrongful, public, and totally undignified and pointless deaths” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 207). Fogle took over the whole affair and finished the litigation in sixteen months. This process marks the first time he tries to do something for the family, thereby taking the role that was played by father in the past. The litigation is also Fogle’s first personal attempt to overcome the “tedious, complex, cynical endlessness” arising from the legal fallout (Wallace, *The Pale King* 209). The legal affairs are some unavoidable and boring responsibility for Fogle. While at that time he has made his mind to take these boring responsibilities. The inner motivation for him to completely change is his guilt over his father’s death. Fogle always thinks that he is partly responsible for his father’s death since they were caught in the crowd because Fogle got up late, and his apathy begins to break down: “...it is true that I miss my father and was very upset about what happened, and sometimes I feel quite sad at the thought that he is not here to see the career path I’ve chosen, and the changes in me as a person as a result” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 190). Later, he takes an accounting class by chance. The professor encourages students to work hard for CPA exam and remarks: “True heroism is you, alone, in a designated work space. True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer. This is the world. Just you and the job, at your desk” (Wallace, *The Pale King* 232). The professor’s words

validated his father’s behavior and enhanced his wish for self-reform. We can see from corporeal narratives in later chapters that Fogle indeed succeeds in such reformation, becoming an examiner who “turns a page” again and again in the IRS office (Wallace, *The Pale King* 312).

Tracing the embodiment of Fogle and his father reflects a common issue in the 1970s when Generation X grew up and were in conflict with their parents. The generation represented by Fogle features a new ethos of cynicism. They like to make a mockery of their parents’ 1960s liberal pieties (Boswell 20). Many young people in this generation depart too far from reality. They hate any ordinary repetitive work and lead meaningless life of enjoyment, so that they need to be corrected by something like boring work. Fogle is one successful case of correction. He is pushed to change his cynicism practically, emotionally, and intellectually after his father’s death, and he finally gets away from his “wastoid” life: he can endure a tedious accounting job, and he can adapt his body to confined space and tiring work. He gradually realizes that boredom is an unavoidable challenge in achieving true heroism.

Fogle’s case provides another dimension to view boredom as of some positive effects on life. For those who have too radical or cynic attitude towards ordinary life, experiencing and understanding boredom can be a treatment. Fogle’s despise of boredom comes from observing his father’s body, his conflict with father are embodied, but it is also at the death of father’s body that he begins to change himself and devote to boring work. Eventually, he proves with his body that he can endure the boredom in life and take responsibilities like his father. In this way, he grows from an apathetic, radical “Generation X” to a normal adult with a more reasonable understanding of his responsibilities and values. Embodying Fogle’s changes is not to justify boredom, but to disclose another effect of boredom, or another possible way of how it works in reality. Boredom is pervasive of all time, and people usually feel bad of it. While it is not all harmful. For most people in real life, boredom is more like an unavoidable state, as long as one tries to lead a positive and meaningful life. Just like Wallace has stated in Kenyon College, if one knows what reality is, he or she “will not consider possibilities that aren’t pointless and annoying.” (Wallace, “This Is Water” 91) For this reason, learning to endure boredom is as important as countering the negative symptoms of boredom.

Conclusion

In his interview with Steve Paulson, Wallace indicates the universality of boredom: “Probably all jobs are the same and they’re filled with horrible boredom and

despair and quiet little bits of fulfillment that are very hard to tell anyone else about.” (Wallace, “Some Kind of Terrible Burden” 161) His posthumous work, *The Pale King*, is just like a full picture of boredom’s different realistic effects. Exploring these corporeal narratives, we can have a relatively complete view of boredom and know how it changes characters’ bodies and minds. Corporeal narratives in this work are vivid shows of boredom, suggesting symptoms or qualities of boredom that cannot be observed from psychological analysis. Reading those bodies affected by boredom, we can also have a clearer understanding of bored mental feelings. On individual bodies, boredom often comes together with the complications that cause pains in body and mind. While a group of people in boredom can be more powerful, they get sick and mechanized, act in a unified way, and can assimilate new comers to the same bored state. Further, this effect can even be used on purpose, such as sacrificing examiners’ health for government’s profit. Besides, boredom’s transference is unconditional, which means it can be easily picked up by surrounding people, as is shown in the infant’s case. It can have very deep influence on individuals, depriving people of a complete personality for a long time. While the effects of boredom are not always negative—devoting to boring work can correct cynicism in some sense. In this way, the “reality of boredom” looms large with these corporeal narratives: it is a mental state, but it also has much to do with physical body; it may bring physical pains; it can mechanize a group; it can spread easily to anyone; it can cause long-lasting damage in one’s mind; and finally, enduring boredom can also correct too radical ways of living. In a word, boredom is neither good nor bad, but more like a common state of living in contemporary people’s life, related to both mind and body’s health. We need the ability to overcome its complications, but we also need the ability to endure boring things of everyday life. With such knowledge of boredom’s mechanism, readers might be able to get on well with boredom.

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